DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 280 UD 018 830

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TITLE Marital Happiness of Black Women.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 25p.; Not available in hard copy due to author's restriction; Paper prepared for the Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies (6th, La Crosse, Wisconsin, April, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Mothers; *Blacks; *Females; Marital Instability; *Marriage; Social Factors; Working Women
IDENTIFIERS *Michigan (Detroit)

ABSTRACT

According to a study of 256 black married women between the ages of 26 and 60 living with their spouses, marital happiness is more common among black women than marital unhappiness. This finding is based on the secondary analysis of a sample of data collected in Detroit in 1968-1969. Variables statistically significant to the marital happiness of the women studied (as tested by Chi-square) were: work status, age, number of children at home, incidence of ulcers, marital disagreement, and general happiness. Stepwise analysis indicated that the variables that contributed most to marital happiness were high levels of general happiness, low marital disagreement, no marital separation, and absence of children at home. Although white collar occupations led to greater marital happiness than blue collar occupations, socioeconomic status, overall, proved to be much less significant than other variables analyzed. (Author/WI)

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ED166280

FEB 2 8 1979

MARITAL HAPPINESS OF BLACK WOMEN

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Paper prepared for
6th Annual Conference on
Ethnic and Minority Studies
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
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Abstract

This is a secondary analysis of data collected in 1968 and 1969 by the Program for Urban Health Research, Department of Psychology, at the University of Michigan. It was a probability sample of 1,000 adults living in Detroit. The respondents were married, between the ages of 25-60, and were living with their spouses. The present study consists of 256 Black women selected from the 1968-69 study.

The paper examined the relationship between marital happiness and several independent variables. The following variables were found to be statistically significant to the marital happiness of Black women (as tested by Chi-square): work status, age, number of children at home, incidence of ulcers, marital career, marital disagreement, and general happiness.

Additionally, to determine what variables have the greatest impact on marital happiness, Stepwise Regression Analysis was applied. These variables are: general happiness, low marital disagreement, no marital separation, and no children at home.

The conclusion from these data is that happiness is more common in the marriages of our respondents than is unhappiness. This is considered a signal of marital strength.

MARITAL HAPPINESS OF BLACK WOMEN

Marital happiness or marital satisfaction is one component of the marital relationship which has generated a large amount of research. Even though an abundance of research has been done along this line, it has generally focused upon white populations, with a few studies including Black samples. In such instances the studies have resulted in comparisons between Blacks and whites. Comparative studies have always shown Blacks to be less happy or satisfied with their marriages than whites. This seems particularly explanatory from the standpoint of differences in the conditions of life of Blacks and whites. The latter group generally experiences better life conditions than the former group. Since there is empirical support for the contention that life conditions affect marital happiness, as well as general happiness, a difference in marital happiness is expected.

Unlike research which has only investigated the marital happiness of Blacks in comparison to the marital happiness of whites, this study only investigates the marital happiness of Black women. It is the researcher's position that Black people should be studied on their own merits. To compare Blacks with whites is mainly to accentuate that which has been, too often, reiterated, "that Blacks are different from whites." This point usually expresses or implies negative connotations. Therefore, it seems that if we really want to learn about the various facets of Black life, we must study Blacks as a separate group, making intra-group comparisons. Especially, in that there is more similarity in the life conditions of Blacks than there is between Blacks and whites.

Sample and Methodology

The data reported here were collected in 1968 and 1969 by the Program for Urban Health Research, Department of Psychology, at the University of Michigan for a study which investigated the role of stress and heredity in Black and white blood pressure differences. The study was based on a sample of 1,000 adults living in Detroit. The respondents consisted of married adults between the ages of 25-60, living with their spouses. A sample of 256 Black women was taken from this study for the author's dissertation, 1974. The data for this paper are based on the latter study.

The sample selected by the Program for Urban Health Research was taken from residence areas which varied in extremes of high and low stress conditions relative to the city. This was done by a factor analytic technique. This technique resulted in the final selection of high and low stress areas. These areas were in the extreme quartiles of factor scores. The rates showed sharp differences between high and low stress across median income, median education, crime rates, and marital instability. This pattern was also revealed in other rates such as school truancy, "dropouts," welfare registration, etc. (Harburg, et al, 1973). Thus, relative to this study, a high stress area is a group of two census tracts which is low on socio-economic factors and high in rates of crime, marital instability, and residential instability. The reverse of these factors characterizes a low stress area.

An index of marital happiness was constructed on the basis of Likert Scalings. Once the index was constructed, histograms were computed to determine the cut-off points in assigning levels (high,

medium, and low) to it. The index includes the following index variables plus the questions from which the variables were derived:

Marital Happiness

a. Often angry with Spouse: "How often do you feel angry or irritated with your spouse?" (less often angry=happiness)

b. Agree with Spouse Much: "How much do you feel that you and your husband see eye to eye and agree on things?" (less often disagree=happiness)

c. Get on Each Other's Nerves: "How often do you and your husband get on each other's nerves?" (less often get on nerves= happiness)

d. Wished Never Married: "Do you ever wish that you had never got married?" (less often wished never got married=happiness)

e. Marry Same Spouse Again: "If you had your life to live over, do you think you would marry the same person?" (desire to remarry same person=happiness)

These questions were accompanied by precoded answers, based on a five-point scale.

Findings and Discussion

Socioeconomic Status

In testing the relationship between marital happiness and socio-economic status - occupation, income, and education - the associations were non-significant and weak (data not shown). This finding is contrary to what is expected. Nevertheless, there is a tendency toward positive relationships. That is, women with high levels of education, prestigious occupations, and high family incomes are more likely than others to express marital happiness. The most consistent pattern, even

though non-significant, was between marital happiness and husbands/wives occupations. In both instances white collar occupations led to greater happiness than blue collar occupations.

Overall, status variables seem to contribute very little, if any, to the marital happiness of the respondents. The suggestion is that this may be somewhat attributed to status inconsistency. To put it differently, Black women may acquire all the attributes of a high social status and still receive low prestige rankings because of race and sex. This leads to the conclusion that race and sex, but especially race, have a more adverse effect on marital happiness than affluence or education.

Employment Status

Research shows that there is a relationship between marital happiness and employment status (Paris and Luckey 1965-66; Gover, 1963; Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Orden and Bradburn, 1969). In testing the relationship between marital happiness and work status, the significance level was relatively high (.01) but the strength of the association was very weak (G =-.08). Evidently, there are some undetermined variables contributing to the significance level. Table 1 shows that working wives

"Table 1 about here"

are more likely than non-working wives to experience both high and low levels of marital happiness.

Nevertheless, when comparing overall marital happiness of working and non-working wives, a combination of high and medium marital happiness, non-working wives appear to be happier than working wives (81% and 75%, respectively; these proportions are derived by collapsing the high and medium categories in Table 1). Another point can be made regarding these data. Since, as already stated, working wives experience higher

levels of marital happiness than non-working wives (36% and 23%, respectively), the suggestion is that this is not due to employment per se, but to outcomes of employment. It may be that the economic and social outcomes for working wives, at least for most, are superior to those of non-working wives. For example, it is commonly known that many wives work in order to supplement the husband's income (This is especially true of Black women). Hence, working makes it possible for the family to enjoy a higher standard of living than it would ordinarily enjoy.

Age

Studies testing the relationship between marital happiness or satisfaction and age have been contradictory. One study found no differences between marital happiness and age (Gurin, et al, 1960), while another study reported some differences (Renne, 1970). The data in Table 2 show that

"Table 2 about here"

women who are 45 years of age and over are more likely than younger women to have happy marriages. It should be noted that, even though the relationship is significant and positive, the strength of the association is very weak. (.09). This finding replicates one found by Renne (1970). It suggests that as women get older they find solutions for their marital conflicts and differences or they become more tolerant of them .

Also, the ages of 45 and over represent a period in marriage when many women have completed their child-rearing role. Most of their children live away from home. Therefore, the pressures of child-rearing which often compound ordinary marital problems are removed. Now, more time and effort can be given to the marital relationship.

Children at Home

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings regarding marital satisfaction in the sixties was that children tend to detract from, rather than contribute to marital happiness (Rollin and Feldman, 1970; Renne, 1970). This was surprising in spite of the fact that earlier studies reported the same (Leslie, 1967). The data here (Table 3)

"Table 3 about here"

supports the above findings. They show explicitly that marital happiness is greatest for women who have no children living at home. Even for women who have children at home, it appears that those with 3 or more children present are more likely to experience high marital happiness than women with 1 or 2 children present. On the other hand, those women with 4 or more children are more likely to experience low marital happiness than all the women who have children living at home. Nevertheless, since the strength of the relationship is so weak (G= -.07), it is concluded that some other variable(s) is affecting it. A finding by Renne (1970) is especially relevant. It revealed that Blacks, especially those rearing children, were less likely than those not rearing children to be satisfied with their marriages.

The implication of these data is that the absence of children in the home (whether because of childlessness or because of children being away for marriage, etc.) has a tendency to lead to a more favorable marital relationship. Supposedly, more time is available to give to the marriage than when it had to be divided between the parent-child and the husband-wife relationships. In sum, it seems reasonable to conclude that the presence of children in the home places a strain on the marital relationship.

Homogamy

There is a widespread tendency for people to marry those who are similar to them in age, education, and occupation. Even though minor age differences indicate little about differing resources and differing interests of spouses, the norm or expectation in our society is for the male to be several years older than the female. Hence, this "normal" group tends to be most satisfied with their marriages (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). This notion was not confirmed by our data (not shown). The relationship between marital happiness and age similarity was non-significant and weak (.48; G = .08). While age similarity contributes very little, if any, to marital happiness, educational similarity contributes much more. Table 4 shows that the greatest happiness is derived from homogamy,

"Table 4 about here"

followed by husband-superiority, while the least happiness is derived from wife-superiority. The fact that husband-superiority seems to contribute more to marital happiness than wife-superiority is in keeping with the traditional belief of male superiority. Yet, this is contrary to the common belief that Black women are dominant (in families headed by both male and female). On the basis of this belief, one would expect Black women to be happier with their marriages when their education exceeds their husbands' education. Even though the significance level is less than .05, it is moderate (.08). Furthermore, the finding replicates one found by Blood and Wolfe (1960).

Serious Health Problems

The fact that chronic health problems may affect one's general well being is empirically proven (Renne, 1970). The state of one's health may influence or may be influenced by one's physical condition.

The data in Table 5 show that there is an association between

"Table 5 about here"

marital happiness and high blood pressure, but it is in the opposite direction of the prediction, and the strength of the relationship is weak (G = .12). These data also reveal that there is no association (.51) between marital happiness and heart disease. In regard to marital happiness and ulcers, it is explicitly shown that persons who have ulcers are less likely than persons who do not have them to express a high level of marital happiness, and these women are more likely to express a low level of marital happiness. It should be noted that the significant level and the strength of the relationship are moderate. This finding supports a similar finding by Renne (1970) which found that marital happiness was negatively associated with serious health problems, although there is lack support for this finding with regard to marital happiness and both high blood pressure and heart trouble.

In noting the relationship between marital happiness and high blood pressure, the relationship is in the opposite direction of what was predicted, and it is significant. This finding raises an interesting question: Why is it that the women who have high blood pressure are more likely to be happy with their marriages than those who have ulcers? A probable answer to this question is that there are stresses and strains within the marriages of those women who have ulcers which contribute to the incidence of this disease. On the other hand, the knowledge of high blood pressure may solicit compassion, empathy, and understanding from spouses. This may be particularly true since high blood pressure is known to be the number one killer of Black people. To put this explanation in a framework of the logic of research analysis, ulcers may be an intervening variable. Diagrammatically, stresses/strains → ulcers → marital unhappiness.

On the other hand, high blood pressure may be an antecedent variable. Diagrammatically, high blood pressure → empathy, compassion, etc. → marital happiness.

Marital Career

Here, the concern is with comparing the first marriages or once-married with the widowed-remarried and the divorced-remarried. The assumption sometimes made is that the once married is more adjusted in his or her marriage than the other two groups (Leslie, 1967). In examining the relationship between marital happiness and marital career, the null hypothesis was tested, and on the basis of the significance level obtained (.57), the null hypothesis was accepted. By examining the data trends (Table 6), one observes that the widowed-remarried

"Table 6 about here"

experiences more marital unhappiness than either the once-married or the divorced-remarried. But since the N is small, there is no need for alarm. Nevertheless, the differences are sufficient to warrant further investigation of a larger sample(s). It is especially interesting to note the differences between the widowed-remarried and the divorced-remarried. It seems that an explanation other than that the finding is a fluke, even though one is tempted to say so, can be offered. It could be that widowed women were happy with their former marriages, which ended without them having a choice. Even though the greater proportion of these women express happiness, it may be that they are comparing their happiness of the present marriage to the former marriage which may have been more satisfactory. Thus, this may contribute to some widowed-remarried women experiences of less marital happiness than divorced-remarried women, who evidently terminated their marriages because of some dissatisfaction.

Marital Disagreement

Disagreement or conflict within a marriage may contribute to its stability or instability, depending upon its intensity. Thus, it was hypothesized that marital disagreement is negatively related to marital happiness. The data for testing this relationship are presented in Table 7. The data show that those women who express high marital disagreement

"Table 7 about here"

are less likely than those who express medium or low marital disagreement to be high on marital happiness. The relationship is highly significant (.000) and the strength of the relationship is relatively strong in the hypothesized direction (G = -.68). These results give us a high level of confidence in this relationship.

General Happiness

Black people experience many conditions within society which affect their quality of life. Hence, it seems reasonable to expect that general well being has some effect on their marital adjustment. The expectation is that the happier one is with her total life, the happier one is with her married life. The data presented in Table 8 test this relationship. The data are very explicit in showing that women who experience high

"Table 8 about here"

levels of general happiness are more likely than those who experience medium or low general happiness to be high on marital happiness. On the other hand, women who are low on general happiness are more likely than those high or medium to be low on marital happiness. In noting both the significance level (.000) and the strength of the relationship (G = .68), our level of confidence in the association between marital happiness and general happiness is high.

Now that we have tested the relationships between the dependent variable (marital happiness) and several independent variables, the second part of the analysis is for the purpose of determining what variables (from a number of selected ones) have the greatest impact on marital happiness. This is determined by Stepwise Regression Analysis, and it is an exploratory effort to find the "best" model for explaining the variation in marital happiness. The data are presented in Table 9. The

"Table 9 about here"

data show that the Index of marital disagreement is the single best predictor of marital happiness, followed by general happiness. All these variables, except general happiness (which has a positive impact) have a negative impact on the dependent variable. To put it differently, with increasing marital disagreement, marital instability (operationally defined as number of times separated), and number of children at home, the amount of marital happiness expressed is less.

A discussion of these variables, except for marital instability (number of times separated), has been presented previously in this paper. Thus, some discussion of this variable is in order. From the standpoint of these data, "Number of Times Separated,"is viewed as marital instability. Marital separation implies a decline in marital cohesiveness and solidarity. Such a decline is expected to have a negative effect(s) on marital happiness. Therefore, marriages which have encountered separation, if only once, are expected to be less happy than those in which no separation has occurred.

The overall predictive value of the variables presented in the regression model is determined by the multiple correlation and amount of explained variance. From Table 9, the multiple (R) is .65 and the amount of explained variance (R^2) is 42%. This is considered a "good"

model, relative to what is often obtained in the social sciences. By doing a more thorough statistical analysis, conceivably this model can be improved.

Summary and Conclusion

In testing the relationship between marital happiness and several selected variables, it was found that several variables seem to contribute to marital happiness, as suggested by using Chi-square analysis. They are as follows: work status, age, number of children at home, presence of ulcers, marital career, marital disagreement, and general happiness.

From among the variables tested by use of Stepwise Regression, the ones having the greatest impact on the marital happiness of Black women are: general happiness, low marital disagreement, no marital separation, and no children at home. As we reflect on research done on white women, it seems that most of these variables contribute to their marital happiness in the same way. The differences between Black and white women seem to be more of degree than of kind. Even though comparisons between Black and white women is not the focus of this paper, this might be of some interest to readers.

It may be concluded from these data that marital happiness, which is considered a marital strength, is more common in the marriages of the women of this study than unhappiness. This is in spite of notions to the contrary.

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TABLE 1

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY WORK STATUS

	Marital Happiness			
Work Status	High	Medium	Low	% N's
Non-Working	23	58	19	100 (103)
Working	36	39	25	100 (153)

X^2 (2df) = 8.86; p = .01; Gamma = -.08

TABLE 2

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY AGE

	Marital Happiness			
Ages	High	Medium	Low	% of N's
45+	42	32	26	100 (93)
44-36	25	54	21	100 (84)
35-25	24	56	20	100 (79)

X^2 (4df) = 13.86; p = .01 G = .09

TABLE 3

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN AT HOME

Number of Children at Home	Marital Happiness			
	High	Medium	Low	% N's
4 or More	34	39	27	100 (54)
3	33	47	20	100 (45)
1-2	19	59	22	100 (98)
None	46	32	22	100 (59)

X^2 (6df) = 15.55; p = .02; Gamma = -.07

TABLE 4

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY HUSBAND AND WIFE SIMILARITY OF EDUCATION

Educational Differences	Marital Happiness High	Medium	Low	% N's
Wife More Education				
3 or more years	19	52	29	100 (52)
1-2 years	25	47	28	100 (64)
Equal	44	35	21	100 (73)
Husband More Education				
1-2 years	30	53	17	100 (40)
3+ years	33	56	11	100 (27)

X^2 (8df) = 14.25; p = .08; Gamma = .18

TABLE 5

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEMS

	Marital Happiness				
1. Presence of High Blood Pressure[a]	High	Medium	Low	%	N's
Yes	44	28	28	100	(43)
No	28	50	22	100	(213)

	Marital Happiness				
2. Presence of Heart Trouble[b]	High	Medium	Low	%	N's
Yes	39	39	22	100	(36)
No	29	48	23	100	(220)

	Marital Happiness				
3. Presence of Ulcers[c]	High	Medium	Low	%	N's
Yes	5	65	30	100	(17)
No	33	45	22	100	(239)

[a] χ^2 (2df) = 7.21; p = .03; Gamma = .12

[b] χ^2 (2df) = 1.36; p = .51; Gamma = .12

[c] χ^2 (2df) = 5.37; p = .07; Gamma =-.41

TABLE 6

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY MARITAL CAREER

Marital Career	Marital Happiness			% N's
	High	Medium	Low	
Once Married	34	45	21	100 (174)
Divorced	27	48	25	100 (72)
Widowed	10	60	30	100 (10)

X^2 (4df) = 2.92; p = .57; Gamma = .13

TABLE 7

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY INDEX OF MARITAL DISAGREEMENT

	Marital Happiness			
Marital Disagreement	High	Medium	Low	% N's
High	5	38	57	100 (39)
Medium	18	57	25	100 (123)
Low	58	36	6	100 (94)

X^2 (4df) = 71.38; p = .000; Gamma = -.68

TABLE 8

INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS BY GENERAL HAPPINESS

	Marital Happiness			
General Happiness	High	Medium	Low	% N's
High	38	47	15	100 (201)
Medium	5	52	43	100 (39)
Low	6	31	63	100 (16)

X^2 (4df) = 38.03; p = .000; Gamma = .68

TABLE 9

INFLUENCE OF SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES ON INDEX OF MARITAL HAPPINESS[a]

Selected Independent Variables	Correlation Coefficients (r)	Percent Variance Explained (R^2)	Standardized Regression Coefficients (b*)	N=255
Degree of General Happiness	.52	.27	.352	
Index of Marital Disagreement	-.51	.39	-.368	
Times Separated	-.30	.41	-.127	
Number of Children at Home	-.10	.42	-.102	

$R = .65$ $R^2 = .42$